

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

Wandering Souls

BILLBOARD

Two young soldiers meet on a jungle trail, one lives, one dies. Their fates are connected for 40 years.

[sound montage]

I'm Marc Steiner...join us for "Wandering Souls", produced by the Center for Emerging Media. First, this news

Segment A –

Hello, I 'm Marc Steiner and welcome to the first in a series of stories about a war that seems at once very distant but always with us The war between America and Vietnam ... We've called the first of these stories, Wandering Souls because the Vietnamese believe that there's a spiritual bond between the living and the dead and that unless a soul can come home to its birthplace .. it will wander forever.

Eight of us decided to go to Vietnam...3 of us were veterans of the Vietnam War ... and three of us were war resisters. Warriors and Anti-warriors, we were looking to reconnect with the place that had shaped all our lives for the past 40 years. But even before we left ... our journey took a detour ...

One of our crew, Marine combat veteran and now writer Wayne Karlin had heard from another vet --- a former army officer who had an intriguing story.

36 years ago, he had shot and killed a young Vietnamese soldier. It was his first kill. 36 years later he had decided he needed to find the family of the man he killed .. Over the next five months we learned the rest of the story ... The story of two young soldiers ... wandering souls of the Vietnam war ..

SOUND BRIDGE: (start music low)

COPY: Homer Steedly arrived in Vietnam in August of 1968, a young farm boy from Bamberg, South Carolina, a fresh faced officer all of 20 years old.

HOMER: Some of us came over gung ho, save the world from communism

I thought Barry Sadler and that Green Beret song was cool, I used to sing that. I mean, I bought it hook, line and sinker.

COPY: The bloodiest years of the Vietnam war were still ahead but already rumors were circulating about planned troop reductions and efforts to wind down the war. So Homer knew they weren't planning to win anything.

HOMER: so we already knew, but what happens then, is you're there, and now that you're there your goal is to get back alive and to get as many of your people back alive as you can, so you concentrate on that, your job now is to pursue the war and kill the enemy, because the more of them that're dead the less of them that'll be shooting at you.

MUSIC BACK UP AND FADE UNDER.

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The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

COPY: It was March 18th, 1969. Homer was stationed with his unit in the highlands near the borders of Laos and Cambodia. That day he was on patrol along a trail that cut through the triple canopied jungle. This was part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail used by the North which the North Vietnamese used to carry arms and supplies from North to South. Homer stopped to take a break.

HOMER: It was about 10 or 11 in the morning and it was sunny by then. It was just at the point where it's startin to get really hot . . . probably 90 95 degrees, and ///like I said/// I turned around and there he was., and the strangest thing, at first it was almost surreal, I mean, we're all in green fatigues, yknow, muddy and sweaty, and really looking like guys in the field. Here this guy comes around the corner, and he's got on light khaki uniform, clean light khaki pith helmet, I mean he looks like he just came out of an awards ceremony or something. I must be hallucinating, the heat's gotten to me, y'know.

COPY: The Vietnamese soldier Homer faced that day was Hoang Ngoc Dam. He was the second oldest son among six children from Thai Giang, a small farming village not far from Hanoi.

SISTER [THAM]: MY NAME IS HOANG THI THAM. My brother, Dam,/// was neat, from his hair to his way of walking,/// his clothes always looked pressed, even though we did not have an iron, and he always combed his hair in a special way, pressing the comb down to make a curl on top at the front./// He did not talk a lot, but he cared about everybody . . . my parents; he cared even about the smallest things.

BROTHER [HOANG DAM CAT]: My name is Hoang Dam Cat. I was born in 1954, when Dam was still at home. Since he was a kid, he liked soccer very much, and he played on the village team. Some of his team mates still remember his image.

MARC: Do you think about what might have been happening to Dam in the 5, 10, 15 20 minutes before he saw you, given how he looked?

HOMER: Well when he first came around the corner he was looking down at the ground, just putting one foot in front of the other, so he'd probably been marching all day. So he was just traveling and he didn't expect to see anybody out there. It was a wide open trail. It was a nice clear trail, and he was just diddy-boppin' along, when he looked up and saw me. And then he started pulling weapon off his shoulder. My weapon was already down at my waist, so it was ready to fire. I hollered at him, and he didn't stop. He tried to get that weapon down, and just before he got it level on me, I fired.

SOUND: SHOTS

COPY: The encounter on the trail lasted only a few moments ...

HOMER: In my total abject fear of that moment, I just cut loose, and a couple of rounds stitched him through the chest, and just killed him instantly. I mean I could look in his eyes we were so close together. We were probably 30 feet apart, and then later I look at him, and he was so young. I mean, he was a kid. ///It kind of warped my mind there for a while/// but it's a chance encounter, y'know, there were two of us; we both panicked and one of us walked away alive, and I'm sorry he's dead, but I'm glad I'm alive.

Copy: For a few minutes, Homer stared down at the young man he had just killed ... then he bent down and felt through his pockets of his uniform ...

There was a notebook with the neatest delicate writing, intricate anatomical drawings, poems and what looked like identification papers.

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HOMER: I didn't know, I mean, I just thought they'd be a real good keepsake or memento from the war, y'know. Just to show the kind of people we were facing. And I sent em back when I got 'em back, I sent 'em back to mom, and I told 'em, "Put these away somewhere safe, because these are important, y'know. By the time I got back to the States, I was so stressed out that I didn't want to think about Vietnam. Just completely forgot about those documents.

SISTER [THAM]: When Dam knew that he would go to the front, he was very happy. He cavorted with happiness, but my mother turned her head to wipe her tears away. After he left, we folded his clothes, put them aside, and my mom would sniff them because she missed him.

COPY: Dam also left behind a bride.

PHAM THI MINH [WIDOW]: My name is Pham Thi Minh, I'm 64 years old now. I married Dam when I was only 17 years old. It was four o'clock in the morning when he left. He took the knapsack; I took my conical hat and my sandals, and we walked to Chau Giang, taking shortcuts through the patty field, so I had to roll up my pants. When we got to the main road, I washed my legs and hands, and put my sandals back on, and then we walked. Whenever I saw cars passing by, I was scared and had to hug him. He was very caring.

SISTER [THAM]: He told us that if he went to the war, he would either lie under green grass, or come back with red medals, and if he didn't come back, we had to take his place, and comfort mother.

WIFE: Every night when I was in bed, ...if only there was some news...that he lost his legs and arms and legs and could not tell the family. But it did not come true.

Sister Tham: At first the news about his death was just rumors . . . people whispering.

BROTHER [CAT]: We did not get the official news until 1972, that Dam died in a hamlet name P'L'Ngon, but they did not have the name of the cemetery where his body was moved.

Copy: For the next 36 years no one in Dam's family knew for sure what had happened to him. For 36 years his notebooks lay in a darkened corner of a home in South Carolina...till they began their journey back.

ACT: When I opened the envelope it was with a great deal of trepidation. And reaching my hand in and touching those documents, touching the notebook, I had the real sensation that I was touching Dam. Because I was physically touching what I knew the Vietnamese believed was left of his soul, a part of his soul that could be brought back to the family. And now it had been given over to me. This soul was now in my house.

COPY: His family believed Dam's soul was wandering. Lost.

Homer Steedley's soul was also lost. He was haunted by stories of the war he couldn't tell anybody else.

By Dam's soul living in his soul .

I'm Marc Steiner. In a moment, part two of Wandering Souls.

SEGMENT 2

OPENER

SHARED WEIGHT

The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

COPY: Welcome. You're listening to

"Wandering Souls", a documentary on the Vietnam War, from the Center for Emerging Media. I'm Marc Steiner.

COPY: In 1970, Homer Steedly came home from Vietnam.

HOMER: I came back from the war. It's like somebody turned off a light switch.

COPY: He was 23 years old and had been through two tours of combat duty. He was an officer, decorated for bravery. He had led men into battle. Had led some to their deaths.

Then he went home to South Carolina... and like thousands of vets who'd seen combat...found himself out of sync with the familiar world he'd left behind.

HOMER: Friends eventually start coming around and want to know about Vietnam and all that, and you start talking, and the next thing you know, you look around and they've gotten quiet, and they've left because you've said something that shocked them so bad;

COPY: So Homer stopped talking...He tried to ignore the movies in his head...images of things he had seen and done. things that had made him different.

HOMER: The jungle opens up and there's this little patch of elephant grass all of a sudden snipers and the first shot that was fired I was walking right behind one of the guys in the platoon ///// and I look over and he'd taken one right through the forehead and all I can see is that pink waxy lining of the skull. His brains were gone. . ///Now I kinda zone out at that point cause I'm just paralyzed with fear, and all of sudden I don't hear the noise anymore. It's quiet. I can feel the warm sunshine; I can smell the fresh cut grass. I can see ants walking along the ground. I feel something in my mouth; must be those scrambled eggs I had with my C rations this morning, I'm chewing on it, yknow. And then all of a sudden I notice the ants are carrying little pink things . . . little

globules, pretty looking pink globules. About that time, it dawns on me

(START SLOW FADE AND BRING NARRATION IN ON TOP) they're carrying are bits of that guys brains. My mind just explodes, cause I realize that what I'm chewing on is part that guy's brains, and I just got up and start projectile vomiting.

COPY: Homer had begun drinking after his return.... He'd landed a good job at the University of South Carolina fixing computers. But he was living alone in a trailer thirty miles from campus...More and more, he isolated himself, engaging in solitary and dangerous sports.

ACT: Homer: The first nine or ten years back in the states I was going through post-traumatic stress, I did all the adrenaline sports. I raced motorcycles, stock cars, I jumped out of airplanes, flew, underwater cave diving, mountain climbing. I was crazy ... I was hunting that adrenaline high still, you know.

COPY: The images persisted except for one....that was locked away inside his head...the memory of his first kill ...the young soldier on the Ho Chi Minh Trail...And he didn't remember the things he had taken from the young man's body...So for 36 years, they lay in his mother's attic in Bamberg, South Carolina....

[SOUND OF DOGS BARKING...]

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The Fall of Saigon, 30 Years Later

COPY: A world away from the North Carolina hills, in the hamlet of Thai Giang.....the the family of Hoang Ngoc Dam waited for him to come home.

Two sons from Dam's family went to war ... neither came home ...The eldest brother Chi had been captured and executed by the South Vietnamese. His body had been thrown into the sea. The second son, Dam, was also missing. In 1972, officials brought a death certificate to the village. Neighbors came to commiserate. The family lit incense.

Luong: /////even when we got his death certificate, we still thought, maybe it was a mistake, and maybe he was missing and his unit could not find him. ///

COPY: So the family began a dogged search to find out what had happened to their brother.

ACT: [Cat] In the spiritual life of Vietnamese people, we believe in "song gui thac ve" which means that people who live in this life need to rest in their home soil after their death, so their descendants will remember and light incense for them, and we the living will be at peace. If we can't find his body, then we will forever have to think about an unfulfilled task, because according to our tradition everybody has to go back to his place of origin to be buried.

COPY: Dam had become one the more than 300,000 wandering souls created by the war with America. They were missing in action...thousands buried in unmarked graves...and their families engaged in desperate efforts to find them and bring them home. Many consulted fortunetellers. So did Dam's family.

ACT: I remember what my mother said after her consulting with the fortunetellers. She said that many of them told her that Dam was still alive, but he was living in a very far place in a foreign country, and that he would come back in glory.

Tham: So we encouraged her to believe that. We even attended séances, during which Dam would appear and always say he was very sad, and cry. We thought that he was sad because his wife had gotten married again, but he only said: I'm very sad.

COPY: Thirty years went by. The family made one more effort to find him. They turned to Dam's old friend.

Huy: My name is Pham Quong Huy. I'm 67 years old. ///In 2002, Dam's family, including his brother Cat, and his brother in law Dieu, came to me to ask if I could accompany them to the South to look for his body.

COPY: The military told Huy and the brothers that Dams name was on a list of martyrs but the area contained many burial places and no-one could give them the name of the cemetary where Dam might be buried.

ACT: (Huy) So we searched more than one hundred tombs. We could not find the tomb with Dam's name, so I told his brothers, that this is all I could do, since we had no more information, sadly, we had to go home.

COPY: By 2002 Homer Steedly's life began to change. He met Tibby Dozier at the university. She was the daughter of a World War II general and the granddaughter who in World War I was awarded the congressional medal of honor. She knew what soldiers lived through and was a willing listener to the details of is experiences and the memories he was now willing to allow himself to recall.

ACT: Well when we first met, Homer was very intense, serious, and very shy. and I did make it my goal, we had to break down these barriers...but things have changed so much...in the last three years. Homer finally retired from his job and I think having the time to go ahead and confront some of these memories.

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We had come back from a trip..and .I went to bed and took a nap and started hearing what I thought was an animal wailing...it was Homer...watching the moving "we were soldiers"...I didn't realize I was making enough noise for her to appear. Homer had had several smaller breakthroughs...that afternoon...finally was able, he had that strength to let go of it.

COPY: Homer started a website where he wrote about his experiences in Vietnam. He began to correspond with other Vietnam vets. But there was still a missing piece, something haunting Homer him that he didn't know was there. The memory of that incident would start his real homecoming from the war. It began after a phone call from his mother.

ACT: Homer: My mom was cleaning out the attic at her place and found lots of stuff. She had kept all the letters I'd sent her from Vietnam, ///, ////and she says I've got some stuff here that looks like medical drawings , and it looks like it's written in Vietnamese that I think you sent while you over there...

COPY: Homer and Tibby went up into his mother's attic. They found Dam's notebooks with its elegant writing and delicate anatomical drawings ... The memories of that moment of his first kill came flooding back.

ACT: And I realized that I wanted try and get those back to whoever they belonged to, just simply because it belonged to them and it would probably be the last thing they had from that individual. So I was really interested in getting back . . . I had no idea how I was going to do it.

COPY: But Homer had read a book called "Light Ruck" by Tom LaCombe who had been a platoon sergeant in the 4th infantry....in the area where Homer had been. He contacted Lacombe, who put him in touch with another writer and Vietnam vet...named Wayne Karlin.

ACT: (Wayne) Tom emailed me //// and said there's a friend of his named Homer Steedly, who had been a lieutenant, then a captain, and company commander in an infantry division in Vietnam, and that Homer had taken some documents from the body of a North Vietnamese soldier that he had killed, and that he wanted very much to

find the family of that soldier and return the documents. Homer had scanned the documents on to his website...help me translate...In fact I thought the way I could help him best was to get in touch with Hao because she is a journalist.

COPY: Phan Thanh Hao is a translator and magazine writer in Hanoi. She had worked with Wayne on a collection of stories by Vietnamese writers and poets.

Hao: I had been involved with interviewing hundreds and hundreds of Vietnam veterans, listening to hundreds and hundreds of poems. When I moved out of my job as a kind of press officer, I feel I would totally forget the war and forget everything. When I had to read Homer's website...all the diaries, I think, it was my nightmare.

COPY: But Hao agreed to help. She and her editor, Y Ban, placed an article in the magazine. It was coming out in March for the 30th anniversary of the war.

ACT: When doing the special issue...we put a letter from Wayne Karlin. In his letter he talk about...with the documents of the late war martyr...then when the newspaper appeared, two days later, Dam's sister got the news.

MUSIC

ACT: (tham) I remember that day. A relative came by just before I went to work and gave me the newspaper. When I read the article about Dam, I could not stand and I told my husband, Dam has returned.

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COPY: Wayne told Homer that the family wanted Homer to come and bring the documents to them. Homer said he couldn't do it. He asked Wayne to go in his place.

WAYNE: When I finally became convinced Homer wasn't going to go, and he asked me to bring back these documents...he told me he was going to send them to me. and he did. What I wasn't prepared for was how fast that happened...he sent it overnight express...the next day this padded envelope arrived at my house....when I opened...had the real sensation I was touching Dam///because I was physically touching what I knew the Vietnamese believed was left of his soul, the part of his soul which could be given over to the family..which had now been given over to me.

COPY: We'll return to our story after this brief break. You're listening to Wandering Souls, a documentary from the Center for Emerging Media.

SEGMENT 3

SOUND OF VILLAGE – birds, ducks, etc.

COPY: On the 28th of May, 2005, a small van made its way north from Hanoi. It traveled along roads lined with factories and lush, green rice paddies... toward the village of Thai Giang. In the van were two American writers, who were also Vietnam Vets, Wayne Carlin and George Evans; Evan's wife, Daisy Zamora...and Vietnamese journalists Phan Thanh Hao and Yban. They carried with them a box containing the journals, letters, and drawings of Hoang Ngoc Dam. The documents had lain in an attic in Bamberg, South Carolina for 36 years. That day they would be returned to his family.

Homer Steedly, who had taken them from the body of the man he shot and killed one morning in 1969....wasn't there to see the crowd of villagers gathering to greet the caravan. Homer had stayed home in America...and instead had sent a letter to the family, apologizing (SNEAK IN HOMER UNDERNEATH COPY)...telling them he could not afford the trip and even if he could, was too shy to meet with them.

ACT: (UP)

HOMER: [Reading letter] I'm very touched that you have an altar that keeps Dam's memory alive....Look what I did in the ignorance and folly of my youth...for over a quarter of a century, I've carried the image...wisdom to settle conflicts without using its youth to kill strangers.....people should know what...in my dying moment..would surely call to me..meet as friends....Respectfully yours, Homer.

SOUND - MOTORS AND WAILING. (BRING IN UNDER COPY AND CONTINUE UNDER NEXT ACT.

COPY: So Homer didn't hear the wailing that went up as the caravan arrived in the village....

ACT: [Y BAN]... That cry is to welcome the soul...that cry...

COPY: The family and neighbors and gathered dignitaries searched the faces of the Americans, trying to figure out which one was Homer.

ACT: (Cat) At the beginning, ppl here said that surely Homer would come back to return the documents but maybe he was so afraid that we were still holding a grudge against him or we would take revenge by hailing stones.

ACT: (HAO) Everybody came and asked us, Where is Homer...Homer must appear there.

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COPY: Dam's youngest brother Loung stared at George Evans, the vietnam vet who had accompanied Wayne Karlin to the village.

ACT: [George] He stood at the door and looked at me

Not a trace of emotion, a stone, stoney look. //The anger came from him believing that we were deceiving him, perhaps out of fear, out of shame, and once he finally understood it, he was ok.

CROSS FADE SOUND: Brother crying..sounds of ceremony

COPY: The Americans walked through a gauntlet of wailing villagers into the village community center. Before an altar decorated with flowers and incense sticks, in front of family, friends, and village dignitaries, Wayne Karlin handed Dam's possessions to his elder brother, Cat.

WAYNE KARLIN: (Wayne in Bar)...“They had their white mourning head bands on and they were just touching these documents like there was something sacred...and of course they had his photograph...”

MARC: What did you say:?

WAYNE: village dignitaries...I just said that...looking at his diary...valuable life taken away...whatever came to my mind...

SOUND: Live recording fragment of Wayne giving documents in village “I can only express my regrets that we were ever in this country . . .”

WAYNE: people were just pressing us...touching us... the villages don't see many westerners.

Luong - “It was like we were receiving his body, the whole village welcomed him back, everybody wore mourning bands just like his body had returned.////

VOX/SOUND: Opening box, showing documents, pages turning... .

COPY: Sometime after the ceremony, Dam's brothers and sisters and his army buddy Huy, opened the box that contained Dam's belongings ... they unwrapped the flag that covered THEM.. . they held the certificates of merit given to Dam by his commanding officers, his medals for valor as a medic; his notebooks decorated with flowers and anatomical drawings; a game of tic tac toe; poems. The family picked them up ... held them lovingly ... remembering Dam.

THAM: He can rest peacefully. When that american shot him, he looked directly at that guy's eyes, maybe he thought that maybe this man also has a good heart, so he let him keep his notebooks and papers for 36 years. I think Dam must be happy now, in another world, satisfied with what the America has done.

COPY: The family discussed Homer's letter and the things he'd written on his website about his encounter with their brother.

CAT: Our family and people of this village feel very proud because the enemy, who killed our man, now came back and praised us...Because the american the used to be enemy the one who killed my brother, now came back and praised him...Homer said that my brother had the proud stature of a superior person.

FADE TO BLACK:

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COPY: Back in South Carolina, Homer and his wife Tibby, heard about the ceremony by email.

ACT: TIBBY: "Well the night after we found out about the document return...release of his burden...wonderful healing that took place.

CAT: We wish him and his family good health, and our family would like to thank him and his family for their keeping my brother's documents for 36 years. And they kept them completely intact. I always tell my brothers and sisters that even we may not have been able to preserve them that way; Homer kept them whole, without a stain or tear, through war, fire, and time. And if after he killed my brother, he did not pick up the documents, then we would never have seen my brother's documents again. But after killing my brother, Homer's human feeling arose, and I remember reading the article in which he said that my brother was too young, and in just the blink of an eye, he'd shot. You know that, in wars, everything happens within a few seconds, and afterwards, even if he had regrets, there was nothing he could do. I read Homer's diary about that many times; how he had given the documents to his mother and how they haunted him, so that now that he can't come here. We all sympathize, 101m59: And we want him to come here, and not worry about anything; it is just that now he and our family have some connection.

HOMER: I would like to go back. ...

COPY: Not long ago, I played a videotape of the village ceremony for Homer.

HOMER: I would like to go back just to have a little closure for myself. To remember Vietnam in a non-combat way. ///.And I would like to meet Dam's family. I'd like to meet them face to face. To let them know how deeply sorry I am that it happened. Hopefully they'll meet me and get to know me a little bit and realize that I'm not quite an evil demon like they may have thought of at one time ...I look forward to it.

MARC: I don't think they think you're an evil demon now.

HOMER: ... I think from what I've heard about them is that they're deeply religious. They have a deep connection with the Divine and so do I.

So we'll connect that way . . .

HAO: In Vietnam, you know, we have a certain spiritual relation that we call karma . . . We think that Dam was a sacred soul. He was so sacred that he could gather us together: the one who have fought, and the one who were thirsty for peace. He was so sacred to gather all of us here, to do this thing, to meet today. So that is what we believe.

COPY: Hong Ngoc Dam's documents now rest on the family altar in Thai Giang, his soul drawn back to the place where he was born. At home in South Carolina, Homer Steedly has found a measure of peace with his wartime memories.

(pause)

A chance encounter between two young men on a jungle trail began a story that hints of the kind of world that might be built from the ashes of conflict. For Wayne Karlin, it's a satisfying ending to a most unusual story of war and its aftermath.

WAYNE: The Vietnam war itself has been a war for many people without any endings. And that people want and need and crave somehow to bring it together to end it. And it rarely happens, cause it was such a terrible and complex war, that we never get to those kinds of endings. So here was somebody who had the opportunity, for himself and for many other people

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to create one ending. // I felt privileged to be able to be a part of it because you rarely get a chance to do something that good. It 's almost a little selfish in thinking about doing it in that way. It was immensely satisfying, and emotional.

COPY: This program is dedicated to the men and women who fought in the Vietnam American war, to those who died, and to those who are still missing in action, to the Wandering Souls of both sides.

You can find the complete story of Homer Steedly and Dam Hoang on our website: www.centerforemergingmedia.com . Thousands of journals and diaries from the bodies of North Vietnamese soldiers and the fighters of the National Liberation Front known as Viet Cong are stored on microfiche at the National Archives. Some 9,000 have been returned to Vietnam through the Vietnam Veterans of America. I'm Marc Steiner, thank you for listening.

MUSIC: under credits

CREDITS

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a 360° view of the people and stories behind the issues

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